

How socialist is the Socialist Workers Party?



Wildcat (UK)'s analysis of Britain's most high-profile far-left group, and its role during the miners' strike. Originally published in 1985, it remains of interest.

Part one - the nature of the SWP

One of the most significant groups which appears to be outside the orbit of the Labour Party is the Socialist Workers Party. It is important not primarily because of its size (though its membership is around 4000), but more because of the fact that its policies seem credible to many who have rejected the Labour Party and are committed to bringing about socialism through working class struggle.

The SWP also has a seemingly clear position that Russia and the Eastern European countries are state-capitalist, which separates it from all of the Trotskyist groups. This is reflected in its slogan, "Neither Washington nor Moscow, but International Socialism."

In terms of political activity, an enormous amount of energy is put in by members, up and down the country, at workplaces, picket lines, meetings, selling Socialist Worker, and so on. Unfortunately much of this potentially revolutionary energy is channelled ultimately in the direction of supporting some of the very institutions which uphold the present system.

The Labour Party

The first thing to note is that the SWP considers that both itself and the Labour Party belong to the same 'working class movement'. Readers of Socialist Worker are regularly reminded of Labour's record of attacking the working class. However, this is explained as being due to either 'mistakes' or 'betrayals' by leaders of a working class party. The 'mistakes' are committed by left-wing leaders who according to the SWP, are led to sacrifice their principles through the pursuit of electoral success. The 'betrayals' are committed by right-wing leaders, who have become corrupted by the lure of luxury, power and influence within capitalism. The fact that all labour leaders become corrupted with monotonous regularity is explained by their remoteness from the rank and file; and by their exposure to ruling class ideology through their daily contact with members of the ruling class in parliament, the civil service, etc.



How socialist is the Socialist Workers Party?

Part one - the nature of the SWP

One of the most significant groups which appears to be outside the orbit of the Labour Party is the Socialist Workers Party. It is important not primarily because of its size (though its membership is around 4000), but more because of the fact that its policies seem credible to many who have rejected the Labour Party and are committed to bringing about socialism through working class struggle.

The SWP also has a seemingly clear position that Russia and the Eastern European countries are state-capitalist, which separates it from all of the Trotskyist groups. This is reflected in its slogan, "Neither Washington nor Moscow, but International Socialism."

In terms of political activity, an enormous amount of energy is put in by members, up and down the country, at workplaces, picket lines, meetings, selling *Socialist Worker*, and so on.

Unfortunately much of this potentially revolutionary energy is channelled

ultimately in the direction of supporting some of the very institutions which uphold the present system.

The Labour Party

The first thing to note is that the SWP considers that both itself and the Labour Party belong to the same 'working class movement'. Readers of Socialist Worker are regularly reminded of Labour's record of attacking the working class.

However, this is explained as being due to either 'mistakes' or 'betrayals' by leaders of a working class party. The 'mistakes' are committed by left-wing leaders who according to the SWP, are led to sacrifice their principles through the pursuit of electoral success. The 'betrayals' are committed by right-wing leaders, who have become corrupted by the lure of luxury, power and influence within capitalism. The fact that all labour leaders become corrupted with monotonous regularity is explained by their remoteness from the rank and file; and by their exposure to ruling class ideology through their daily contact with members of the ruling class in parliament, the civil service etc.

On the other hand, sometimes the 'failure' of Labour governments is explained in a slightly different way: "Labour government after Labour government has come to power pledged to carry out thorough going changes in society. Time and again they find their plans sabotaged by big business and the city." (*Socialist Worker* 17.11.84) But in any case, the root cause of Labour's failure is "the whole busiest of attempting to reform a system incapable of reform"

(SW 7.12.84) In a word, the Labour Party is the reformist end of the workers movement, the SWP is the revolutionary end.

However, the SWP reminds us, revolutionaries should also be "the best, the most determined fighter for reforms ... What is more we wage the struggle for reforms side by side, arms linked with the reformists." (SW 24.11.84)

In this way people who join the SWP because of their radical opposition to the Labour Party, find they have to work arm in arm with the labour Party after all.

State Capitalism

Against the workers movement - reformist and revolutionary - is pitted the state. As Socialist Worker explained to its readers before the last election: "The most powerful and most undemocratic group in our society are the bosses. They are a tiny group - a mere 288 people make up the boards of directors of Britain's top twenty companies, ruling over the lives of the 1,250,000 people they employ ... The top judges policemen and army officers - what we term the state - rule Britain. They represent the capitalist system which survives on sweating profits out of the workers." (SW 11.6.83) Thus an organisation which is able to see that Russia is state-capitalist, pretends that Britain is still living in the era of 19th century private capitalism. In fact, state capitalism is well advanced in Britain as well. The public sector now accounts for about a third of the British economy. The 'ruling class' therefore includes not only the boards of directors of large companies, but also leaders of nationalised industries, directors of public agencies such as the Manpower Services Commission, heads of department in local government etc, etc. The state includes not only judges and the police, but also government ministers, MPs and local councillors of all parties; as well as trade union leaders, and leading figures in education, the media, and so on.

In the same way, the SWP supports as "thoroughgoing changes in society" state-capitalist measures, such as nationalisation. As any miner or steel worker will tell you, nationalisation offers no benefit to the working class at all. Nor does the SWP's call for "nationalisation with workers control" make it any better.

Nationalised industry is still capitalist industry. The logic of capitalism leads the bosses of nationalised industries to attack their workforce like any other bosses. Experience has shown that 'worker directors' given the job of running capitalist enterprises are soon transformed into 'worker bureaucrats'. They become members of the ruling class, 'co-opted' from the working class, like trade union leaders and many Labour Party politicians.

From this understanding of state-capitalism in modern Britain, it is easy to see that the Labour Party is not the reformist end of the workers movement, as the SWP claims. In the past, the Labour Party did arise from a genuine working class reformist movement.* (* In fact, a genuine working class reformist movement is no longer possible, since capitalism can no longer grant long lasting meaningful reforms. Our aim must be to destroy world capitalism, not reform it.) But the

modern Labour Party has become an organisation controlled by leaders of the ruling class, and tightly enmeshed into the structure of the capitalist state.

So when the SWP fights "arm in arm" with the Labour Party, it is arm in arm with the ruling class.

Of course, socialists must actively support every attempt by workers to better their living and working conditions. It is also true, as the SWP says, that revolutions grow out of mass struggle by workers around "some matter of vital and immediate importance to their lives."

(SW 24.11.84)

But the joint campaigns with the Labour Party do not relate to mass working class struggles around vital issues of immediate importance. On the contrary, when the Labour Party agrees to involve itself in radical sounding campaigns such as CND or the Anti-Nazi League, the issues and timing are carefully chosen to ensure that they have no immediate relevance. The aim of all the demos and meetings is simply to polish up the radical image of Labour's leaders.

If workers are taken in by these charades, this means that they are less prepared when, as soon as a struggle arises which really matters - such as the miners' strike, Labour leaders put the boot in.

By encouraging militant workers to link arms with the Labour Party in campaigns, the SWP

is not acting as "the best and most determined fighter for reforms." *It is actively contributing to the sabotage of future struggles by labour leaders.*

As the crisis of British capitalism deepens, the success of every struggle increasingly depends on workers' ability to recognise their so-called 'reformist leaders' for what they are: our enemies.

At Election Time ...

The SWP calls on people to "vote Labour without illusions." Yet as we have seen, its entire strategy is based on maintaining the most dangerous illusion of all - that the Labour Party is part of the same 'workers movement' as workers in struggle.

Despite running articles on 'Labour's Lousy accord', the Tories are still made out to be the root of all evil.

"Cruise missiles and pit closures ... part of the same 'struggle to beat the Tories,'" said Socialist Worker in March 84, forgetting to mention that Labour's record on-nuclear weapons and pit closures is even worse than the Tories'.

Before the last election, a front page article in Socialist Worker ran as follows:
"Another 5

years of Tory government?

Another 5 years of rising unemployment, of savage attacks on the health service, of squeezed welfare services and soaring arms spending, of deteriorating inner city areas, of the installation of Trident and Cruise? The prospect is almost too frightening to contemplate."

(SW 30.10.82) In fact, this passage could just as well have been a description of the 1974-79

Labour government. But the SWP didn't say that another Labour government would be "too frightening to contemplate."

When the labour Party attacks the working class, the SWP says it is "adopting Tory policies."

Just as it described the brutal anti-working class policies of Mitterand's 'socialist'

government in France as "an experiment which failed."

Just as when Labour councils attack their employees, Socialist Worker calls it a "Town Hall Tragedy", and calls the Labour bosses, "an unexpected foe." Just what did they expect?

Just as when Kinnock fails to Support the miners, Socialist Worker writes that "incredibly the Tories received a massive boost from Neil Kinnock ." So what's incredible about that?

And so on and on, on every page of every issue of Socialist Worker, the same

hypocritical expressions of shock and dismay -all with the same aim of maintaining the illusion that workers have the right to expect something better from 'their' party.

Trade Unions

The SWP fiercely denounces 'betrayals' by union leaders. These are chronicled in detail in Socialist Worker. What conclusions does the SWP draw from these experiences?

"The horizons of trade union leaders are those of trade unionism. Their role is to negotiate the terms on which workers are exploited. The trade union bureaucracy will therefore always prefer a compromise, even if it amounts to a betrayal of their members' interests. Their concern is always to contain workers' struggles, to keep them from escaping the boundaries of normal collective bargaining.

"It is tempting to conclude from this analysis that the trade union leaders are a thoroughly reactionary group of people, as bad, if not worse than the Tories, the bosses and the police. At least Margaret Thatcher is open about her hostility to workers' struggles, one might urge."

(SW 21.7.84)

It certainly is tempting to draw this conclusion. And in fact this is the view of the authors of this pamphlet. However, the article continues:

"This attitude is mistaken. The trade union leaders are sometimes compelled, usually against their will, to fight the bosses." (SW 21.7.84)

This explains why, although the SWP is one of the leading advocates of rank and file action, it does not call for rank and file-workers to control their own struggles. For the SWP, rank and file action has the limited aim of "forcing the officials to act."

To take just one example, during the residential social workers dispute at the end of 1983, the SWP said that "the key to winning the dispute is to put pressure on unions officials and argue the case for solidarity." (SW 23.12.83)

But just a minute! The fact that union leaders can be drawn into the fight "against their will"

by rank and file action, is hardly a reason for regarding them in a better light

than before.

Isn't it likely that they will turn round and stab their members in the back at the first opportunity? Of course it is.

Let's see what union leaders think of themselves. Here is an extract from an internal TUC

document, absolutely not for publication, which was leaked by Socialist Worker.

"Unions are the vehicle for winning consent from individuals as workers for policies that employers and governments wish to pursue and that need the cooperation of workers if they are to succeed. Proper collective bargaining is the way to maximise efficiency and win acceptance of technological change and some of the more radical proposals needed to improve productivity." Despite all the Tory attacks, the document continues, "the government has been unable to remove the trade unions entirely from playing a role in the state." (SW

28.1.84) This document makes it crystal clear that the union leaders don't see their role as one of leading workers in struggle. They see their role as one of persuading their members to accept whatever unpalatable measures the bosses and the government wish to impose on them. They see their role as part of the state, as part of the ruling class.

This is not to say that every branch secretary or shop steward is part of the ruling class. Many of them try to defend their members' interests. Nevertheless there is a tendency for all union officials, even local ones, to be absorbed into the ranks of the state. The union organisation described here by a S Yorkshire bus worker is typical: "The union leadership is bureaucratic and bunkered. The network of privileges, the complex procedures and round of meetings - all

in paid time for the stewards - plus the full-timers in the union office next to personnel, all comprise to make the leadership lethargic and management-minded. Votes to cut overtime, collect money for the miners or whatever, are ignored as management don't agree with them and won't pay stewards to organise them." (SW 30.6.84) The TUC document also shows the real reason why union leaders oppose the new union laws. Union leaders have already shown that they are prepared to use the new laws to SWP press unofficial actions. NALGO, the AUEW and EEPTU have all refused to Support strikes by their members because without a ballot they are illegal NALGO leaders even

called the police to disperse an illegal picket by their own members outside a union conference'. What union leaders object to is that the new laws also attempt to downgrade their own power and influence within the state.

Their response to the new laws has been twofold. Firstly, they attempt to organise their members in set-piece campaigns to 'defend the unions.' Secondly, wherever -their members embark on struggles to defend their own vital interests, such as pay and jobs, the union leaders try their utmost to demonstrate their value to the state ... as strike-breakers.

In this situation, it follows that union leaders' 'Support' for a struggle is like the kiss of death.

Socialist Worker is quite happy to play along with the union leaders' double-crossing strategy. The front pages call on workers to DEFEND THE UNIONS, on the grounds that

"what is at stake is no less than the ability of workers to direct and control their own organisations." (SW 7.12.84)

Meanwhile, on the inside back pages, example after example of struggles defeated by union leaders' sabotage shows that workers have already lost control of the unions. This does not prevent the SWP from continuing to advocate the disastrous strategy of forcing union leaders to fight "against their will."

Following the strategy recommended by the SWP, militant residential social workers went to extraordinary lengths to persuade their union leaders to act. Finally, by invading a union conference, they managed to get the union leaders to promise to step up the action. These promises were not carried out by the union leaders. But their effect was to lull rank and file members into a false sense of security that their leaders were organising the struggle for them.

By raising false hopes of this kind, the SWP's tactics prevent militant workers from seeing the need to take matters into their own hands, by appealing directly to their fellow workers for a struggle organised by workers themselves against the union leaders.

Breaking from Trade Unionism

The basis of trade unionism is, to use the words of the SWP, to negotiate the terms on which workers are exploited. In other words the traditions of trade unionism are based on compromise.

But the crisis of capitalism means that increasingly no compromise is possible between workers and bosses. In this situation, union traditions, based on compromise, are no use and a recipe for defeat. New forms of struggle are required which respond to the necessity for all-out-confrontation with the bosses. They are necessary not only to win day-to-day struggles to defend living conditions; but also to prepare the ground for the revolutionary confrontation which will provide the only lasting solution to the capitalist crisis by abolishing capitalism once and for all.

The chief differences between the new forms of struggle required and the old trade union traditions are as follows.

Firstly, the trade union tradition of striking for a fixed set of ‘reasonable’ demands will have to be abandoned. Instead workers should aim to raise and widen their demands during the course of the struggle; not only to reflect the growing power of their movement, but also to encourage other workers to join the fight.

Secondly, right from the start, workers will have to unite across the divisions of trade and industry embodied in trade unionism.

Thirdly, all aspects of the struggle will have to be directly controlled by all workers involved in the struggles through regular mass meetings and a system of recallable delegates. An all-out confrontation with the bosses can only be won if every worker is actively involved.

This means not only getting rid of today’s treacherous leaders, but rejecting the whole trade union tradition of allowing leaders to organise ‘on behalf of’ a passive membership.

In countries where trade union traditions are less strong than in Britain, above all

in Poland in 1980, workers have already engaged in struggles of this kind - in mass strikes which have struck terror into the hearts of the ruling class across the world.

The SWP inside the unions

By contrast, the rank and file activity advocated by the remains wholly within the traditions of trade unionism.

Sometimes the SWP calls for rank and file control of picketing. But it never questions the union—leaders' right to carry out negotiations; nor their right to say what the demands of the strike should be.

The SWP calls on rank and file workers to organise traditional trade union solidarity actions, such as blacking and collections. But it never goes further than this by calling on workers to seek active solidarity in mass strike action which unites workers across union divisions in the same struggle.

Should rank and file workers wish to influence matters of policy of this kind, the SWP

encourages them to follow the complex procedures set down in the rule books - with disastrous results.

A recent issue of Socialist Worker described how SWP members at Longbridge attempted to pass a resolution at a union branch meeting urging Support for the miners, and linking this to action over their own current pay claim. An excellent idea - but the convenor simply ruled their resolution out of order.

By contrast SWP NALGO members in Bolton did manage- to get a motion passed at a union meeting instructing officials to call meetings to step up the action being taken by nursery nurses there. Success? Not quite. The following weeks' issue of Socialist worker complained that t1branch officers have refused to call section meetings despite being instructed to do so."

What a surprise.

Faced with setbacks of this kind, it is tempting to suppose that things would be better with a new set of leaders. The alternative to right-wing union leaders is provided by the 'broad left'

which organises inside the unions with the aim of electing left-wing officials.

Socialist Worker provides ample evidence that 'broad left' union leaders are just as good at sabotaging struggles as right-wing ones. The latest example is Jimmy Knapp, the left-wing successor to Sid Weighall in the NUR, who has surely earned a knighthood by his heroic efforts to stop the miners' strike spreading to the railways. Despite this, the SWP continues to insist that socialists "cannot be neutral" in elections for union officials, and should support broad left candidates like Jimmy Knapp. Their justification for this is that: "an electoral victory for the left could act as a powerful fillip for rank and file militancy. To vote for the left is to

challenge the prevailing ideas of Thatchers' Britain." (SW 22.9.84) In other words because workers have illusions in the possibility of reforming the unions by electing left-wing leaders, the SWP doesn't want to shatter these illusions - even though it knows that the new left-wing leader will almost certainly be just as bad as the old right-wing one.

Is the SWP really socialist?

Many people join the SWP because it seems to offer a radical alternative to the traditional left.- In practice they find that such a radical alternative cannot be developed within the SWP.

At every step they are led back into the arms of the Labour Party and the union leaders.

It is not remarkable that over the years, despite its growth, the SWP has lost a great many of its members.

How are the apparent contradictions in the SWP's politics to be explained?

When the forerunner of the SWP, the International Socialism group, first started out in the 60s, it was more open minded than many other organisations of the left. It represented a fairly conscious attempt to overcome the limitations of the politics of the Trotskyist 'Fourth International', and the ideas of Trotsky that lay behind them. This enabled it to break from the Trotskyist theory that Russia was a 'workers state'. It was also able to acknowledge the reality of the post-war boom and understand the importance of its effects upon working class consciousness and organisation. Traditional Trotskyist groups were still peddling the belief that world economic collapse was just around the corner.

The year 1968 seems to have signalled the failure of IS to overcome these limitations. It set the seal on the gradual slip back into the Trotskyist tradition by IS over the proceeding years.

Maybe this was due to the events of May 1968 in France, and the appeal provided by the sudden swelling of the ranks of IS with eager militant youth, awaiting political action. But whatever the reason, it is clear that after about 1970 the leadership adopted a party building style that left little room for the theoretical questioning of the prior period. As a result, all activity within IS became orientated towards recruitment, and this has continued unabated ever since. It is the same story no matter what area or activity is considered: principles have been subordinated to tactics for getting more people into the organisation.

The SWP's Support for the Labour Party and the unions is thus tactical.

Firstly, to openly call for workers to break from Labour and the unions would not be popular among militant workers. -So using the excuse that "the party must not lose touch with the masses," the SWP advances what it hopes will be more popular views' -which it knows however are not only wrong, but disastrously wrong.

Secondly, the SWP needs the continued goodwill of labour and union leaders. It needs to be able to work inside the unions and the Labour Party in order to launch its party-building campaigns.

Labour and union leaders are happy to accept the SWP as a 'ginger group' inside the left. The SWP gives enthusiastic young activists the chance to let off a bit of steam, but does not encourage theoretical questioning and always, in the end, tells them to vote Labour and defend the unions. (I remember discussing the Labour Party with two young SWP members in the late 70s, and being told by the local SWP leader, "don't bother talking to them, all they're interested in is beating up fascists.")

The SWP claims that the aim of campaigns such as the 'Right to Work Campaign' is to win reforms through mass action. Secretly, the SWP knows that no such 'right to work' can exist under capitalism. The 'right to work' is in fact an example of a Trotskyist transitional demand. The idea behind transitional demands is that by leading people into a fight for

demands which are impossible under capitalism, they will see the need for socialism. In other words, by hitting their heads against a brick wall for them, people will have their eyes opened. The underlying contempt is clear.

It was in 1977 that the IS was renamed the Socialist Workers Party. By this time the demands of maintaining a structure that would build the party meant that there could be no discussion that challenged its theoretical foundations. It could only respond by becoming less democratic. A number of small groups were ejected in the mid 70s, and many individuals left of their own accord. In 1971 IS theorist D. Hallas had written that the type of revolutionary party advocated by IS "cannot be created except on a thoroughly democratic basis; unless in its internal life vigorous controversy is the rule and various tendencies and shades of opinion represented." This theory conflicted heavily with the experience of many who eventually left the party, and often became disillusioned with revolutionary politics altogether. And what is the party being built for? Well they may not explicitly state it, but they believe that the party must seize power on behalf of the working class.

And here is the third reason why the SWP calls for limited rank and file independence from their leaders. It sees itself as a future leadership, and doesn't want rank and file workers to get too independent, in case they get the idea they could do without a specialised leadership altogether.

For us today, the possibility that the SWP will seize power seems absurdly unlikely. But this doesn't mean that we should ignore their ideas. The choice between a policy of 'all power to the working class' and one of 'all power to the revolutionary party, will be as fundamental tomorrow as it was in 1917.

The lesson of the history of the SWP, is that those who claim to be revolutionaries must break theoretically and practically with all forms of ruling class ideology if they are not to become an obstacle to the working class movement.

Part two - The SWP and the miners

As might have been expected, the SWP's line on the miners' strike has twisted and turned from week to week, or even from page to page of the same issue of Socialist Worker, with bewildering speed. Overall however, during the strike, the SWP has moved dramatically to the right.

At the start of the strike the SWP announced that rank and file action was the key to victory:

"The miners can win if the rank and file of the union mounts picketing on a scale even larger than in 1972, and if other groups of workers are able to by-pass their leaders and stop the movement of coal ... Let's insist on strike Committees elected by activists." (SW 21.4.84) This call for rank and file control of the strike was not repeated however. The SWP pulled back from a position which would have led them into outright opposition to the union bureaucracies. Instead, as usual, it attempted to steer a middle course between the union leaders and militant activists.

Following the mass pickets at Orgreave this became much more difficult. Almost the entire NUM leadership, apart from Scargill, opposed the mass pickets and took steps to ensure that they could not happen again. In particular, the sequestration of NUM funds was used as an excuse to withdraw funds, transport and other facilities from the pickets. Now, the NUM had had enough foresight to transfer most of its funds out of the country before sequestration.

Clearly, had they wanted to, NUM leaders could also have planned in advance to ensure that mass pickets could continue despite sequestration. (This did happen in Lancashire. But the strike there was not run by the anti-strike Area NUM, but by branch officials and activists from the most militant pit, Bold.) The SWP later claimed that Orgreave had shown that "area bureaucracies were able to block the scale of mobilisations necessary for effective mass picketing." (SW 3.11.84) In fact, what Orgreave really showed was that effective mass picketing was impossible unless militant miners seized control of the strike from the NUM. Obviously this would be no easy task.

Moreover, any organisation that made this call would not be well received by many of the most militant miners, who remained fiercely loyal to the NUM, despite the fact it was sabotaging their efforts to win the strike. The SW was not prepared to risk this unpopularity.

What Orgreave showed, in other words, was that there was no more political capital to be made by the SWP by focussing on the issue of mass picketing. After some hesitation, the SWP transferred its energies to the miners' support committees. In a dramatic 'Appeal to Organisations of the Labour Left' it called

on them to 'build united support' for the miners.

(SW 20.10.84)

The justification for this new line had already been prepared some weeks earlier. On 15th September Socialist Worker had announced a 'new phase' of the strike with the headline

"ONTO THE DEFENSIVE". In fact there was no major change in the situation of the strike at this time. Unrest in the car plants and local -councils meant that there was probably as good, if not better chance of the strike developing into a wider class movement as there ever had been. The SWP'S 'new phase' referred not to the needs of the strike, but to the interests of the SIW.

Many rank and file SWP members undoubtedly sensed they were being asked to betray the principles they thought their organisation stood for. The leadership criticised their "one-sided development" and told them they had to learn to work with people are not revolutionaries" in order to "draw some of them closer to our ideas." (SW 3.11.84) In other words, by watering down its politics, the SWP hoped to poach a few members from the Labour left. (Predictably the SWP's activity in the support committees has generally been limited to trying to take them over.)

In the light of this weak-kneed opportunism, the SWP's criticism of the labour Party as

'sacrificing its principles for th sake of electoral success' rings rather hollow. So does its criticism of Scargill for "failing to explain openly and clearly to the members that they could only win if they intervened effectively to take control of the strike from complacent area leaderships and unenthusiastic branch committees." (SW 2.2.85) But if he won't, the SWP should have added, neither will we!

Readers who agreed with this criticism of Scargill for failing to call for rank and file control of the strike, which appeared on page 5 of Socialist Worker dated 2.2.85, may have been surprised to read on page 10 of the same issue a major policy statement which stated bluntly that calls for a rank and file movement were "not relevant in an operative sense". This article puts the official seal of approval on the SWP's shift right during the strike. Furthermore, it marks the final abandonment by the SWP of its long tern air of building the party through

an independent rank and file movement. SWP members are instructed to work inside union branches (even though 'we know most of them are shells'), to attempt to recruit members there.

The SWP and the TUC

The consequences of attempting to work through the unions can be seen in the SWP's attitude to the TUC. Before the 1984 Trades Union Congress the SWP warned miners that

'token support' was the most they could expect: "The TUC refused to back the firemens'

strike in 1977, it failed to deliver solidarity to the steel workers' strike in 1980. it ordered the train drivers to call off their strike in

1982 and it refused to back the NGA last December." It will be up to activists to translate the words of any resolution into deeds, they concluded. (SW 1.9.84) But one week later, the words of caution were forgotten as Socialist Worker euphorically declared:

"The TUC resolution in Support of the miners can open the way to victory; in the coal strike."

(SW 8.9.84) The bosses' magazine, *the Economist*, took a rather different view of the TUC's aim in declaring its 'support' for the strike: "Mr Scargill's defeat will come from within the union movement itself. The TUC took the first shambling steps towards this when its moderate executive gathered the miners into the bear hug of ' total support' " (quoted in SW

15.9.34) And *the Economist* could quote Len Murray in support of its opinion: "The purpose of the procedures set out in the statement is to devise arrangements to make the dispute more effective, and to make mass picketing unnecessary." (quoted in SW 8.9.84) Despite printing these warnings in Socialist Worker, the SWP still pretended to be surprised when, several weeks later, the TUC's promises of support had not materialised: "7 weeks ago the TUC

pledged that they would not allow the miners to go down to defeat ... Now is the time for these pledges to be redeemed." (SW 20.10.84) As the weeks lengthened into months "More than two months after the TUC, the general council has yet to issue a leaflet or poster urging trade unionists to back the miners." (SW

17.11.84)and so on and on "It is almost three months since-the TUC Congress pledged full Support for the miners ... TUC leaders should be campaigning day in and day out among their members for action ... " (SW

24.11.84)

Oh come on comrades, this really is too much : "TUC, GET OFF YOUR KNEES '." (SW

7.12.84)

What about the SWP's call for activists to 'translate the words of any TUC resolution into deeds'? Well sorry ... what we really meant was that activists should ask TUC leaders to translate the words of their resolutions into deeds. In other words, its just the same tired old Trotskyist call to 'force the leaders to act' after all: "What You Can DoSend a flood of resolutions to union executives and the TUC general council demanding full Support for the NUM. Insist the TUC launches a massive campaign in support of the strike ... " (SW

17.12.84) All this would be comical if it wasn't so serious. The belief that solidarity for the miners can be organised through the TUC is one of the most important causes of the weakness of the strike. By adding its 'radical' support to this illusion the SWP is helping to defeat the strike.

Working through the unions

Undoubtedly the level of independent rank and file organisation during the miners' strike has been quite low - lower than in several other major strikes over the past decade. Nevertheless a substantial minority of miners have begun to question trade union traditions. What is actually shown here is that militant workers need to traditions to challenge the stranglehold of the union bureaucrats over the strike. . Having decided that talk of a rank and file movement is

'not relevant- in an operative sense', the SWP has advised these militants to work through the unions, The results of this can be seen in this example from Yorkshire:

"In our pit, we pulled a few of the lads who'd been arrested together. I managed to pull three lads round me and we start to go round knocking on doors and had some success in getting people out.

Then we put a resolution to the branch. It said that we should get a list of everyone's name and address who has been arrested and can't go out picketing, and form them into recruitment teams. We should also get a list of everyone who's been passive, and then the recruiting teams could visit them.

Unfortunately this was not passed by the branch committee -you have to put a resolution through the branch committee and this had got knocked back - but it still had to go through correspondence.

So the week before it was due to come up we went round the soup kitchen, asking lads to come to the meeting. We got 150 to the branch meeting where we usually get 35. The branch president refused to admit the correspondence so I got up and asked what had happened to it.

He said he didn't know anything about a letter and threatened to put me through a window.

But the lads who had come to the meeting spoke up for me, so the branch president asked them if they wanted to hear the letter. Much to his surprise they all shouted yes.

It just shows what an advantage we have got over the officials. We work with the rank and file day in and day out, while our branch president is up there in the area office in Barnsley and is so out of touch its unbelievable.

So I explained the case, how we must step up picketing if we to win the strike and moved a resolution condemning the branch committee for not Supporting such a necessary step.

I got a big cheer for this, but they had a fall-back and ruled it out of order. I think that shows-we've got to know the rule book and how we've got to intervene." (SW 15.9.84) What is actually shown here is that militant workers need to tear up the union rule book.

Instead of waiting weeks for proposed actions to be passed through union branches, these miners should have organised the recruiting teams themselves and ignored whatever the NUM tried to do to stop them.

Rank and File Activity

The type of rank and file organisation the SWP called for at the start of the strike has existed.

Take this example; again from the same issue of Socialist Worker that declared that talk of a rank and file movement was 'not relevant in an operative sense': "In some parts of the Scottish coalfields, scabbing has been kept right down. For example there are only 34 scabs in the whole of the 4,000 strong Longannet complex.

The strike is solid because of the strength of their organisation. There are 15 villages in the area with their own strike centres. Nearly all hold two or three meetings a week to discuss the strike. In addition they have a weekly meeting attended by two or three delegates from each centre to co-ordinate picketing. There is a feeling of involvement. About 257 of the men are actively Supporting the strike through picketing, delegation work to raise money and Support and maintaining the strike centres and kitchens." (SW 2.2.85) Attempts by workers to directly control their own struggles in this way, although modest and limited in themselves, are important. Reproduced on a much greater scale, uniting workers across union divisions, this will be the form of a mass workers' movement which can move onto the offensive against capitalism. But this example from Longannet is not what the SWP means when it talks about a 'rank and file movement'. They mean a tightly organised pressure group within the union organised by and for the SWP. This is what they have decided is 'not relevant in an operative Sense; This is why, instead of trying to spread the example of Longannet and help win the strike, they have sent their members into the union branches to build the SWP.

The SWP has also shown a conspicuous lack of interest in the two areas of activity which have been the focus for the most radical activity during the strike: women's' organisation and the 'hit squads

Miners have seen the need to meet state violence with their own violence. organised in a paramilitary fashion, working in semi-clandestinely, the 'hit squads' have attacked NCB

installations, scab firms and strikebreakers. Workers in some pit villages have organised ~

attacks on the police. This is one of the most important gains of the strike. It marks a practical break with the peaceful traditions of trade unionism. It marks the recognition of the need for all-out class war against the bosses.

The SWP condemns the activities of the 'bit squads' as individual acts of violence" which

"can very easily endanger the strike". (SW 2.6.34) However the actions of the 'hit squads' are not individual acts. They are organised secretly of necessity. But they are supported by militant activists as essential back up for more traditional actions such as picketing. The truth is that the straightforward, practical violence of the 'hit squads' is simply too revolutionary for the SWP.

Like the actions of the 'hit squads', the powerful women's movement which has arisen during the strike cannot be contained within radical trade unionism. Women activists don't want to be kept in the kitchens. They want to be on the picket lines. But more than this, they want a say in the running of the strike. This demand challenges the very heart of trade unionism. For once you let miners' wives on to the strike committees, a principle is established. Once non-miners are allowed to participate fully in the strike, the way is open for more and more people to be drawn into the struggle – until what you have is no longer a trade union dispute, but a mass strike. Clearly in this situation the union leaders lose any special claim to authority.

The union leaders recognise this threat to their power. They are afraid of women activists who bluntly refuse to do what they tell them. No wonder they tell the women to 'get back to the kitchens'.

As for the SWP, it tries to steer clear of such controversial issues, and prefers to emphasise the importance of the kitchens, and "money, turkeys and toys". (see Socialist Review, Jan 85).

Where now for the SWP?

The above examples show the problem now faced by the SWP. The SWP rose to prominence through support for rank and file struggles which, although formally outside official union control, had aims and methods which were wholly

compatible with trade unionism. These struggles reflected the power of shop floor workers in a healthy capitalist economy.

Today the situation is completely different. Capitalism is in crisis and the struggle is a desperate one, Rank and file activity in the miners strike has never reached the stage of formal independence from the officials. But in practice its aims and methods, potentially at least, go far, beyond the limits of trade unionism. The experience of the miners strike shows that the transformation from union dispute to revolutionary struggle will not occur via the SWP's half-baked rank-and-filism. If it occurs - it will happen all at once as workers respond to the practical needs of their struggle.

'The middle ground' on which the SWP stands is sinking beneath it. No organisation appears to have lost more during the strike than the SWP; and it is hard to see how they can successfully transfer their activity to the union branches, where the Labour left organisations are already in control. Revolutionaries should not mourn the fate of the SWP. Instead they

should boldly declare that rank and file activists should not aim to reform the unions. They should set their sights on the class war which will meet state violence with organised workers' violence, unite workers employed and unemployed, in all unions and no union, replace the power of the union bureaucrats with the power of the workers' mass assemblies; and destroy the unions along with all the other institutions of present day society.

Taken from www.af-north.org, with editing for libcom.org